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Teaching Advanced Courses In Literature

There is probably no program in the whole college curriculum that is so incoherent and illogical, and yet so seldom questioned or revised, as that in English Literature. It has grown up during more than half a century by an undirected process of makeshift. Never has there been any recognized and established norm. Each institution originally shaped the main features of it out of what its own English Department faculty happened to remember about the courses they took as undergraduates; and in the passage of time this has come to be modified by local pressures of personnel and administration.

One course is added because someone in the department happens to be specially interested in it, another because someone is appointed to the faculty and must be provided with a full teaching schedule. Some course is dropped because for two or three years no one is available to teach it, or because there is a temporary lag in student interest, or because a dean chances to notice how many courses are listed in the English schedule and abruptly demands a reduction in the total.

Vested Interests

Each of us begins our teaching in such a program and accepts it as part of the eternal nature of things. By the time we reach an age and a rank at which we might feel competent to challenge the organization of the departmental offering we have adjusted ourselves to certain particular courses and have established a vested interest in them; therefore we have no incentive to investigate the over-all pattern. Seldom has anyone of us more than the vaguest conception of what our colleagues are covering in their courses. Once a year, if we are advising majors, we piece together a program to fit the hours and the personal vagaries of each advisee: but our conscience probably troubles us when we look over the disjointed assortment of courses on the card and wonder what sort of total it will add up to.

The central core of the English department offerings, questionable though it is, seldom undergoes any scrutiny. The freshman program has suffered (or profited) from a long series of agonized reappraisals, from the prehistoric days when it was called Rhetoric, down through the middle era when it was Composition, into the present millennium of Communication. At the other end of the scale, the graduate program is currently contronting a challenge to justify itself or else reorganize. But between these two charted littorals the vast mid continent of the undergraduate program in Literature remains virtually unexplored. Presumably the reason for this cautious avoidance must be an expectation of difficulty and danger in the venture.

Do We Have a Specialty?

There are several causes for the program in English Literature being so hard to rationalize. One is that it is almost the only

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Committee Report

A CEA Committee on Language came into being this year and has been at work. Its first task was to prepare recommendations on language and linguistics for the Committee on the Ph. D. Curriculum. The committee consists largely of scholars competent in structural linguistics, philology, and English literature, since any meaningful statement on language in English studies must grapple with their full scope. Each committee member (and a number of other scholars) submitted statements which were composed into a draft and returned to them for review. Revised in keeping with suggestions, the report was sent on to Professor Ryan for inclusion in the recommendations to be submitted by the Ph. D Committee.

The Committee on Language has launched on another project: a compact anthology of published papers which interpret modern language studies in relation to English teaching. There are a good many articles in the CEA Critic, College English, the Bulletin of the CCCC, and in other periodicals less easily come by. Professor MacCurdy, of the State Teachers College at Salisbury, Maryland, is editing the book, which will be small, paper-backed, and inexpensive.

The Committee on Language has also assumed responsibility for a panel discussion, "From Literacy to Literature: the Pedagogical Uses of Linguistics," Thursday evening, March 21, at the CCCC at Chicago. Chairman will be Donald J. Lloyd; speakers will be MacCurdy Burnet, Harry R. Warfel, and Edgar Mayer.

Committee members are: MacCurdy Burnet (State Teachers College, Salisbury, Maryland); Seymour Chatman (U. of Penn.); Alva Davis (American U.); John Fisher (Duke); W. N. Francis (Franklin and Marshall); Byron Guyer (L. A. State); A. A. Hill (Texas); Thom. Marshall (Kent State U.); Paul Roberts (San Jose State); James Sledd (U. of Chicago); H. L. Smith, Jr. (Buffalo); Robert P. Stockwell (UCLA).

Donald J. Lloyd, Chairman
Wayne State University

NEWMAN AND THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA

Catholic educators do indeed have a philosophy; they direct their efforts to making better Catholics, and I believe they succeed admirably. In some important particulars, however, Catholic educational philosophy is not Newman's.

It is the great achievement of Newman to have formulated a philosophy of education transcending any partial view of man's nature. Newman as philosopher and educator did not aim at anything short of the whole man. As educator he was not interested in producing religious man, social man, nor anything less than total, untragmented man. "Liberal Education, viewed in itself, is simply the cultivation of the intellect, as such, and its object is nothing more or less than intellectual excellence." As Catholic, Newman undoubtedly would agree that, as Brother Philip says, "the ultimate end is Catholicism." But not as educator. Even the passage which Brother Philip cites is capable of two interpretations.

My own complaint, however, is not against the doctrinaire reading of Newman, but against the sentimental, the dreamy-eyed. Newman had a tough-minded grasp of the practicality of Liberal Education. Many modern English professors are Scholar Gypsies looking across the fields to the spires of 19th century Oxford. I'm afraid they will not solve many problems of higher education by dreaming of the past.

Harlan W. Hamilton
Western Reserve Univ.

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A REMEDY FOR CRITICISM

In **Measure for Measure** Shakespeare gives the figure Angelo these words: "Your brother is a forfeit of the law,/ And you but waste your words." That sounds to me like the essence of judgment, of criticism. Since the law is so, the man who disobeys is forfeit to it, and there's nothing more to be said. Down gavel. Next case. But Shakespeare gives the figure Isabella these words, as in reply to the figure Angelo: "Alas, alas!/ Why, all the souls that were were forfeit once,/ And He that might the vantage best have took/ Found out the remedy." The only implication of this with which I am here explicitly concerned is that it is possible to conceive a remedy for the law, and so for criticism.

But let us listen again to the sound of judgment. Here is a critic applying the law to Robert Frost: "The principles," says the judge, "which have saved some part of Frost's talent, the principles of Greek and Christian thought, are principles which are seldom openly defended and of which the implications and ramifications are understood by relatively few of our contemporaries, by Frost least of all . . . " You hear how Frost becomes a forfeit of the law, of the principles which the critic applies. Here is another critic applying the law to a spokesman for the Inner Voice: "Thus," says the judge, "Thus speaks the Inner Voice. It is a voice to which, for convenience, we may give a name: and the name I suggest is Whiggery." So Middleton Murry becomes a forfeit of the law.

The sound of judgment, criticism. It can be a horrible sound, one of the easiest for us to make, apparently. Yet both Yvor Winters and T. S. Eliot have demonstrated that they can make other sounds than this one of judge, to which we've been listening. "Your brother is a forfeit of the law". Both can sound like that and, as you hear, so do I, as I say they can. But both have sounded differently, have, I believe, "found out the remedy".

Since the word is Shakespeare's, the remedy may as well be developed from his text. Suppose we ask, When on earth does judgment not sound horribly like judgment? Shakespeare replies, "When mercy seasons justice". But what does that mean in this context? The following will explain what I think I mean by that and by this context.

I wonder, for instance, if all communication is not a trick, an art. Verbal communication is a trick my younger son is just getting the hang of. And he's pleased with what he can do, how it sounds, the effects he can get. Sometimes he mocks Daddy the critic, the judge, the admonisher: No, no, no, no, no. Never, never, never, never, never. At other times he is more obviously creative, and we look there, and sure enough, there is the kite, the airplane, the birdie, the horsie, the car. Except in great excitement—airplane, you know—he is perfectly aware of being creative. He knows that he is making the sound. He even knows that he isn't Daddy, but is Timothy creating Daddy, a wisdom which takes the serpent's tooth out of the criticism, and I listen and learn. I think that is what I mean by mercy seasoning justice. The speaker knows that whatever he tries to communicate is finally imaginative, his own creation, nobody else's. The problem seems to be one of sustaining the knowledge when excited.

I return to Yvor Winters on Frost and T. S. Eliot on Murry. Winters says, "These remarks have been unfair to Frost in certain respects." And Eliot says, "Mr. Murry will say, with some show of justice, that this is a wilful misrepresentation." Here, you can hear, both speakers are perfectly aware of what they are doing. They know that they are responsible for their own creations and for the effect they want these creations to have on Frost and Murry, not to mention other readers. But the excitement of airplanes, principles, traditions, ideas, is great, and Winters and Eliot and the present speaker go on to forget that they are creating the sounds, fail to sustain consciousness that they are composing, putting parts together as they can, and lapse into the horrible sounds of criticism, judgment.

Frost becomes "a good poet in so far as he may be said to exist, but a dangerous influence in so far as his existence is incomplete." Murry becomes, less abstractly, one of "The possessors of the inner voice (who) ride ten in a compartment to a football match at Swansea, listening to the inner voice, which breathes the eternal message of vanity, fear, and lust." And I

(*Please turn to next page*)

(*Continued from page 2*)

judge, too. I judge that both Winters and Eliot can sound better than this, less horrible, that they have indeed "found out the remedy".

My problem is, How to sustain when excited the consciousness of creating, how to keep in hand the effect I want. It is a great problem. Airplanes, principles, ideas are exciting. How to share one's own airplane, pilot it, and keep the pilot and passengers aware that it is only, after all, one's own? For it often happens with me that someone gets grounded or bombed while I soar away on principle. And yet what is life without one's airplane? What am I without mine? What is Winters or Eliot without his?

You noticed that both Winters and Eliot took me up with them awhile ago, when they showed me in their essays that they knew who was talking and did not sound life official keepers of the eternal law against Frost and Murry. That horrible sound is all I complain of in human communication. It is all that my younger son complains of, when it comes, say, from the mouth of his father. But when Timothy's complaint takes the form of a conscious imitation, I feel beautifully, not horribly, rebuked. He takes his authority where he finds it and makes something of his own of it. And, as he implies, what do I know, after all, about my effect on humanity except what he and others communicate to me? Timothy's art—often even when he's excited—is as effective as anyone's I know. And I think I know why it is. It is effective because he knows he's creating his communication. He knows that it is not likely to be taken as eternal law, so he doesn't make it sound as if it were. That's all. His art when judging is to imitate Daddy in Timothy's voice.

Daddy or airplane or idea or hope: I guess we all have some great excitement. Mine is, How to avoid that horrible sound, How to keep from grounding Winters and Eliot, say, in order to take them and everyone else who wants to come, up with me? For more and more I feel that the responsibility for grounding anyone at all is too great for me longer to undertake. I know of no remedy in the conventional forms of war, executions, emprisonments, tests, judgment, criticism. In those forms, as elsewhere, everyone has his own airplane, but in those forms everyone seems to be expected to make that horrible sound.

The only possible place, it seems to me, where all airplanes can fly and everyone can ride simultaneously in all and each of them is in frankly, consciously, creative work. But this is very hard to make, whether by voice when speaking or by ear when listening. For one thing, it means that the speaker or auditor will not rest his case on any authority which would ground anyone at all, ever. It means the creation of a world beyond judgment into which as many as will can soar, if not out of earshot of that horrible sound, at least far enough away to hear it in a kind of perspective.

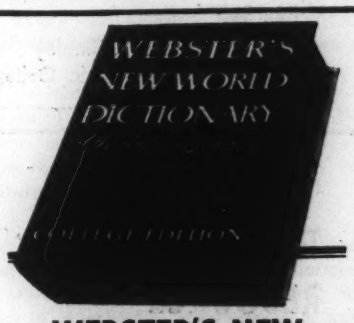
Shakespeare, Winters, Frost, Eliot, Murry can create such worlds, as we know; they have "found out the remedy". My only problem is how to sustain awareness that it is a remedy. Timothy helps me. When I say to him, like the figure King Lear, Never, never, never, never, never—he replies, like Shakespeare, Look there, look there! Since when, all that I read and hear and say ought to tell me that verbal communication is an art, a trick of the voice, the ear, and that if I'd stop criticizing for a minute, I'd see that of course, of course it was, and a miraculous trick, too.

How to season justice with mercy. What remedy for criticism. For me, something like a sonnet will do.

A SENSE OF SELF

So this will charm the worm, at length turn stone
That one noon some shocked star will crack and spatter.
Entrails once, that raged for love, will scatter,
Incandescent waves, no reef, no bone.
All will be gone, unless the trick of mind
That integrating keeps a sense of self
Persists in subtler structures, as an elf
Should find his way through solid barriers blind.
The hardest way of all is not to groan
Though one who makes the whole of sense should batter
Senseless this form, a place wherein I find
Ever sure renewal of that pelf.
That person, somehow kept through every matter
Imagined yet, as saved as God is kind.

Robert G. Tucker
University of Massachusetts



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WHAT'S GOOD ABOUT FRESHMAN COMPOSITION?

With no fear of dulling my colleagues into a smug complacency, with no expectation that what I say will curb criticism, with only a faint desire to uphold the status quo, I still would like to point out, for a change, some of the things that are good about our courses in freshman composition.

The fact that the courses are so varied is one good thing. Colleges throughout the country are experimenting, trying to make the composition classes valuable enough to justify demanding that every freshman be enrolled. Where the traditional curriculum remains, it has been adapted to the needs of this generation. Where changes and revisions are under way, the goal is to supply students with the tools and techniques that they need now, and will need as future citizens. In some colleges tests are used to exclude those students who already are competent; on the other hand, special remedial sections are being added for those who enter college inadequately trained. In other colleges the changes are even greater: the traditional freshman composition course is being replaced by a course in Communication. But instead of viewing these experiments with alarm as mere efforts to adapt to increased enrollments we should recognize that in almost every case the changes indicate thoughtful, open-minded progress.

Curriculum changes almost invariably involve department heads and other administrative officers, as well as faculty members. That all these individuals, with their widely differing emphasis on the problems entailed, can come to an agreement on curriculum requirements is certainly an indication that all are working toward a common goal. This unanimity of aim, it seems to me, is good even if there is little agreement on the best methods for obtaining it.

But no matter how intelligently conceived the curricula may be, we all know that the course is not good unless it is well taught. From my own observations as a staff member, from contacts with instructors in many different colleges, and from associations with students outside my own college, I dare to maintain that good teachers are instructing the freshmen in English composition courses. Classifying them all into three groups may make my generalizations a little more convincing.

First, there is the experienced teacher who really likes to teach freshmen composition. There are such men and women, and it's not a case of sour grapes, either. They like freshmen. They like to have a share in getting them well started on their college careers. They feel competent to offer constructive criticism, to point out and correct errors and weaknesses. They are rewarded by the progress that their students make. They are good teachers.

Second, there is the professor of literature who sometimes has freshman composition added to his schedule. He seldom greets it with joy, but since he has elected to spend his life teaching in the English Department, he accepts it with more or less equanimity; this is not his first experience at it, and probably it will not be his last. Perhaps in the intervals when he is not teaching this course, he obtains perspective. Perhaps it's an aura; perhaps it's his reputation, but he is a good teacher whom freshmen appreciate. Frequently his knowledge broadens and enlivens the subject under discusion, and the students, in some cases, are awakened to an appreciation of literary values.

Third, there may be, in the universities, the teaching fellow, a graduate student who intends to make his life work the teaching of English. He is usually young, and enthusiastic, only a few years removed from the freshmen whom he teaches. What he lacks in experience, he makes up in vigor and freshness of approach. Students feel that he understands their problems and shares their point of view. Usually he is a good teacher. If he's not, he has an opportunity to improve or to move on. But the graduate student generally contributes his share to making his classes in freshman composition valuable to his students.

But the best thing about the freshman English courses is the attitude of the freshmen themselves. They are optimistic in evaluating their own progress, making it conform to the emphasis of the instructor, giving him credit for teaching them to think clearly, to organize, to punctuate, to analyze sentence structure, to have ideas and to communicate them to others. This right attitude of the students is our greatest reward. They tell us how much they have learned—more in one semester than in all four years of high school—they have a feeling of accomplishment. The area will vary with the student's interest and the instructor's emphasis, but so long as students think they have learned something, and instructors think they have taught something worth teaching, the course is good.

Holding individual conferences seems to be a standard practice in freshman composition courses. In my opinion, these conferences make the course of inestimable value to the freshman. Face to face with the student, we can straighten out difficulties without taking class time. The instructor is given a chance to understand the student's problems and to help him most effectively. The poorly prepared student may be helped by special assignments without any embarrassment to him. The talented student may be encouraged to write for the school magazine, to enter writing contests, or to read some pertinent book or article. The individual conference can make the composition course not just a good course but one of the best on the freshman's schedule.

Although we criticize our curricula, our teachers, and our students, we do not do it from pessimism or bitterness; on the contrary, we point out errors and weaknesses in an effort to correct them because we believe in what we are teaching and we want to make it better. However, it may be well to check ourselves once in a while, to examine things as they are, and to look on some of those things and say, "Behold, much to my surprise, these things are good." A just examination of life recognizes the good as well as the bad, but because the bad is so frequently brought to our attention, it has seemed to me worthwhile to point out some of the good qualities that are to be found in our freshman composition courses.

Lenore T. Bingley
Eastern Mich. College

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Freshman Readings and the Reading Freshman

We have changed the anthology for English 101-102 again. Only last fall **Campus Vistas** promised to be, as the publisher's announcement claimed, a stimulating collection of modern writing; but it seems to have done more to stimulate criticism among the staff than interest among the students.

By November, Mr. Boyd was finding its vocabulary demands quite beyond the students in section 101J. In February, Miss Bird reported notable apathy in 102H to the articles on "The Future of the Arts in a Democratic Society." In April, Mr. Bard lamented that the modern poems must have been chosen by an enemy of modern poetry. And so this fall in place of **Campus Vistas** we shall take up an anthology entitled **Freshman Panacea**—just as in other falls we have turned with regret and hope from **Landmarks in Atomic Literature** to **Read with Speed**, and from **Semantic Seed Thoughts** to **Insight**.

Too Difficult?

All these freshman anthologies seemed excellent books when we adopted them. All contained a number of admirably chosen selections. Why then our disappointment in presenting them to students? A single reason stands out above all others: too many of the selections were simply too difficult for freshmen to read.

There is, of course, considerable variation among books of freshman readings. In one or other collection there is perhaps too much effort to get down to the students' level. Yet, after teaching a number of them and examining many more, I am inclined to believe that the pervasive weakness of the anthologies lies in a failure to gauge the interest and percipience of students realistically. Since development of interest and skill in serious reading is a major objective in most first-year programs, I should like to consider this primary weakness of the anthologies and even to venture a suggestion to future editors.

Inadequate Background

A considerable segment of freshmen in most institutions show unusual deficiencies in reading skill and should receive special help in a remedial program. But are the average and even the better students altogether satisfactory readers? How many of them can read stories or essays of some length and seriousness — not to mention poems of any depth or subtlety—with facility and responsiveness? Freshmen are, after all, only boys and girls of seventeen or eighteen. They have, indeed, been pressured into a little serious reading, but, as teen-agers in high school, they have been accustomed for the most part to the sports pages, to the fashion columns, to **Life**, **Mademoiselle**, **Popular Mechanics**, the pulp magazines—not to the **Saturday Review** or **Fortune**, not to T. H. Huxley or Arnold Toynbee, not to Virginia Woolf or Cleanth Brooks, not to Santayana or Whitehead.

Yet it is from sources like these latter that a considerable amount of the material in the typical freshman anthology is drawn. One may argue, "Of course freshmen find these selections uninteresting, even repellent - in fact, they can scarcely read some of them at all—but one of the chief purposes of college is precisely to develop understanding and appreciation for reading of this kind. We want to turn out readers of the quality magazines, readers of essays and serious fiction. To get into deep water is one way of learning how to swim."

Suffocate, Not Swim

My own experience seems to show that when eighteen-year-olds are thrown into reading far beyond their depths, they are likely to be suffocated rather than stimulated. Let me illustrate with a selection in one of the anthologies we have used, Henry Steele Commager's brilliant essay, "Portrait of the American." More than in many other selections, the subject-matter should have given it appeal; yet it proved completely unteachable.

Consider the problem of vocabulary alone. The editors of our text had followed the commendable practice of listing words for study. From "Portrait" they had chosen seventy-two. Most were words which freshmen should know -- but do not: others, like pragmatism, equalitarian, proclivity, transcendentalism, disparate, filiopietistic, and parochialism, we could scarcely expect them

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FRESHMAN READINGS

(*Continued from page 5*)

to be acquainted with.

Even if a prospective Phi Beta Kappa were to look up all seventy-two, he would still be much in the position of someone reading in a foreign language; the words would be strange, and their connotations, so significant for real understanding, would altogether escape him. Reading surely is one of the best ways to vocabulary development, but it seems questionable whether the average freshman can build a vocabulary by encountering seventy-two unfamiliar words in a single selection.

Too Allusive

A similar difficulty in Professor Commager's essay is the richness of allusion. Mentioned in the essay are Boswell, Lockhart, Freeman, Crevecoeur, Brogan, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Plato, Emerson, William James, Royce, Hawthorne, Melville, E. A. Robinson, Jules Romains, Graham Greene, Matthew Arnold, Knut Hamsun, de Madariaga, Spencer, Keynes, Willard Gibbs, Lester Ward, Veblen, Worth, Paquin, Sheraton, Hepplewhite, de Tocqueville, and John Dewey.

In some cases the allusion is self-explanatory or unimportant, but in others a freshman will certainly miss the total meaning if the name is wholly unfamiliar to him. One would like to think that college seniors could identify a number of these names -- it would be interesting to experiment with some seniors -- but the average freshman is probably more conversant with the achievements of such figures in cultural history at Tab Hunter, Mickey Mantle, and Elvis Presley.

Another type of allusion, frequent in serious essays, is casual reference to events in history or movements in thought. Most freshmen do not catch even common Biblical, mythological, and literary allusions. How many will catch Professor Commager's references to "new scientific and philosophical ideas such as evolution, determinism, and Freudianism," "the Puritan and the evangelical tradition," "the doctrine of the natural depravity of man," "the colonial system formulated in the Northwest Ordinance," "laissez-faire, Manchester liberalism, and social Darwinism"?

Too Long, Too Formal

Again, the length and style of many of the selections in freshman anthologies are forbidding to the average student. "Portrait of the American" -- to continue my ungracious use of Professor Commager's essay -- runs to over eleven double-column pages, something like eight thousand words. Although Mr. Commager's vibrant, close-packed sentences, his masterly handling of large and abstract concepts, his striking generalizations, and his careful qualification of statements will be a delight to the accomplished reader, they will probably be something less to the eighteen-year-old, accustomed chiefly to generalizations and qualifications about the college menu, the team's chances of winning, and the types of girls in the various sororities.

What will be even the initial reaction of the eighteen-year-old to such titles as the following, culled from recent anthologies: "The Essence of Tragedy," "The Meaning of Society," "The Nature of Symbolic Language," "Industrialism and American Ideals," "The Social Consequences of Science," "Social Implications of Primitive Art," "The Ethical Attitudes of Privileged Classes"? An anthology, of course, might well provide materials that will be a challenge to careful reading -- and careful teaching. Beyond a certain point of difficulty, both student and teacher are likely to be frustrated, rather than challenged.

Material for Delight

In place of the considerable amount of "challenging" material, I would suggest that a considerable amount of material be included largely for delight -- material indeed somewhat above the level of the student's previous reading, but not frustratingly difficult. An instructor, pressed with the teaching of mechanics and composition, might then turn freshmen loose in their anthology with a minimum of explanation, analysis, and checking.

There are certainly innumerable essays, articles, and stories which would develop a student's reading skill and enlarge his ideas and sympathies almost painlessly. College freshmen, like most people all their lives, are interested in what is concrete, or personal, or humorous, or immediately relevant. Perhaps more experience with this kind of material in their first college reading might better condition them for the more austere pleasures -- to which the college hopes eventually to guide them -- of highly intellectual and demanding prose.

John E. Keating
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ADVANCED COURSES

(*Continued from page 1*)

subject which can be elected without specialized preparation by third-year and fourth-year students who are majoring in every other sort of field. This is a thoroughly desirable state of affairs, for it supplies the English department not only with a larger total enrolment but also with some of its best students, as we realize ruefully when we notice how often the highest grade goes to a student whose major is chemistry or economics. The greatest glory of the English department in our present system is that it alone is providing something toward the noble experiment of "general education." We very properly hesitate to make any change that might hamper this function.

And yet we feel half-suppressed anxieties about it. We look with a suspicious eye at any colleague who has to move to a larger classroom at the beginning of each semester because of the horde of non-majors who flock to enjoy his interpretation of Shakespeare or Byron. Instead of exalting him as a worthy promoter of the humanities we are apt to murmur darkly that he is a showman or to wonder about the severity of his examinations and his grading. While this attitude may be partly motivated by envy, it arises also from our genuine concern as to whether our own majors are ever really subjected to a discipline as rigorous as that which prevails in the foreign languages or in the sciences.

(*Please turn to next page*)

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Is There Progress?

A second difficulty in the program of Literature courses is the absence of any acceptable basis of differentiating them, either as to content or as to relative difficulty. If we divide all the courses into chronological periods, we feel that we are ignoring the organic development of artistic **genres.** If we go to the other extreme and divide the courses according to types only, we realize that the students will gain no sense of how the mental atmosphere of an era affects all its literary production. As usual, we solve the dilemma by a compromise between the two systems, defining some courses by chronological period and some by literary type. The result is bound to be an overlapping at various points.

Even more serious, however, is the problem of sequence. Seniors, juniors, and even some sophomores take the same courses in Literature, and therefore there can be no maintaining of progresive levels of difficulty. The senior in his final semester is still doing the same kind of work and meeting no severer standards than when he started his third year.

As most English departments offer many more courses in Literature than any single student's program can encompass, each student takes his pick almost at random. except for some limited control by departmental regulations or by advisor's fiat. And the courses that he does select are not always taken in the same order: he may choose Milton in his third year and the Victorian novel in his fourth, or vice versa. Therefore every course in Literature has to be conducted in a vacuum. The instructor cannot assume that his class has read any particular works whatever. If he wishes to make comparisons or establish interrelationships, he feels obliged to summarize and describe the works he is referring to, but always with an uncomfortable awareness that some of his students are being bored with information that they already possess.

Sophomore English

At this point I find I must talk about the sophomore course. It is usually believed to serve as a palliative for some of the ills I have been rehearsing. Whether a survey of the whole history of English Literature or a selection of basic masterpieces, it is supposed to provide a background for the future English major, while at the same time giving a cultural smattering for the student who will go no further in English. Supposedly, the English major will thus have been given a chronological perspective, will have been trained in methods of reading great literature, and will have been equipped with knowledge of some essential works that can then be freely referred to in his later courses.

In practice the sophomore course falls far short of fulfilling these objectives. The course usually begins at the most remote point of time, with Beowulf or Chaucer. The immature student is then confronted with Spenser, Donne, Milton, Dryden—authors who are infinitely remote from his personal world. He has time only for a sketchy glimpse of each author. When he encounters some of the same ones in greater detail in his third or fourth year, it is not so much with a pleasant sense of recognition as with a frustrated feeling that he is going round and round in some nightmarish maze. Worst of all, I have found that some of the best students, if they come from a good high school, have already taken a very similar survey of English Literature in their college preparatory curriculum.

Survey of American Literature

I come now to my first positive recommendation for an improved program in Literature. The ideal sophomore course ought to fulfil three objectives: (i) to train the student in effective methods of reading and enjoying good literature; (ii) to use material close enough to his own frame of reference to be comprehensible and interesting to him; (iii) to be confined to a field that is not so extensive as to give an impression of ineffectual nibbling at snippets. All these requirements would be satisfied if the standard sophomore course were a year's survey of American Literature.

If this course were the standard one for all sophomores, I believe that English majors would proceed into the upper-division program with a better preparation, that some students would be attracted to the English major who had not previously decided upon it, and that a larger proportion of non-majors would feel an Interest in taking further courses in the department.

Periods or Genres

The next level ought to be a group of courses specifically for junior English majors in other fields. These courses would probably be organized according to periods, though I see no reason why the division by **genres** would not serve equally well. The English major would normally take two two-semester courses from this group.

Then the student in his senior year should be required to complete his English major from a group of courses requiring a definitely higher standard of achievement, concentrating upon intensive anal-

(*Please turn to page* 8)

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ADVANCED COURSES

(*Continued from page 7*)

ysis of texts and critical judgment of them. These courses should be either restricted to senior majors or open to non-majors upon recommendation by the instructor under whom they did superior work in one of the junior courses.

Perhaps I have spent too long upon outlining a utopian program, since my topic is the teaching of advanced courses in Literature under the conditions that actually prevail. But I do not feel that my suggestions are too impractical. Perhaps some departments already have a curriculum that approaches the logical and efficient one I have proposed. Others, in my opinion, could take a long and serious look at their present offering and decide whether it can be justified.

Enthusiasm Is Essential

Coming at last to the subject of actual teaching in the Literature courses above the sophomor level, I must look first at the obvious question: what objective should be kept in view? Almost all the students in these classes fall into two groups: those who intend to become English teachers in high schools or colleges, and those who think that literature can make a desirable contribution to their future lives as cultivated and happy people.

The second of these categories really must encompass the first also. In my view the sole essential qualification for a good teacher of English is an enthusiastic enjoyment of literature. No amount of pedagogical skill or factual information can compensate for the lack of this enthusiasm. Students catch it by direct infection and discover the pleasure of reading—a pleasure which arises, of course, out of thorough understanding of what is read and also out of an imaginative and emotional response to it.

The practical procedures toward achieving this end, it seems to me, are few and simple.

First, every course ought to be concerned as fully as possible with the literature itself and not with what other people have said about it. Text-book assignments and lectures on background information should be kept to a minimum in favor of concentration upon the interpreting of the literary works themselves. Essays and term papers should not be research reports compiled by the student from secondary sources, but should be his own analysis of the literary text.

Second, examinations should test the student's own power of interpretation. Objective tests have no place in a course in English Literature. If the student has to write a clear, succinct, and intelligent answer to each question, he shows his individual competence and also incidentally proves how well he can apply his mastery of English composition under practical conditions. Nor should the questions be restricted to material that has been covered thoroughly in class. The instructor ought not to be satisfied with having his own ideas handed back to him. Part of every examination ought to deal with material which has been assigned but not discussed. Often it is helpful to include a question on a passage that has not even been previously assigned, and which is put before the student either by the open-book method or on a mimeographed sheet.

Third, there should be a great deal of reading aloud. The instructor should take every opportunity to read aloud to his class, as intelligently and as interpretatively as possible, and also should require each student to read aloud at intervals.

Fourth, the long-neglected practice of memorizing ought to be revived.

Refrain From Indoctrination

One further truism, and I shall have finished. The instructor must steer a difficult course between indiscriminate gushing and narrow prejudice. We want our students to recognize the difference between the best literature and the inferior levels; but we must not try to indoctrinate them with our personal preferences. It is all too easy to take a superior attitude toward Wordsworth, or Pope, or Browning, or any other author whose outlook differs in any degree from what is fashionable today. The class will laugh at each witty, disparaging comment, and will readily pick up the trick of imitation. Perhaps it is a half-conscious effort to avoid the two extremes of over-enthusiasm and over-disparagement that tempts us to evade the issue through the impersonal device of secondary sources. We ask the students to take ready-made opinions from the editor of the text-book or from critics who have discussed the subject, and then we feel smugly that we have not imposed our own will upon the malleable minds of our flock.

Apparently this habit is increasing, if one is to judge by the proliferation of Literature text-books overloaded with editorial exegesis, after the Brooks-and-Warren model. Personality I try to shield myself from any such temptation by choosing whatever text-book has an irreducible minimum of editorializing, and by refraining from burdening the reading-room shelves with an imposing array of reserved books. The responsibility of interpretation falls squarely on me, where it belongs. If I am doing my work properly it gradually transfers itself to the students as the term proceeds. The one axiom must be that the student should feel free to offer his own opinion as to the meaning or the merit of any specimen of literature. If his opinion differs from the instructor's, it must still receive credit in an essay or an examination if it is presented clearly and supported by adequate evidence. In this era of "symbolic clusters" and "thematic levels" and seven-fold ambiguities, a piece of literature has to endure as many diverse interpretations as possible.

I do not wish to go further in suggesting procedures for the Literature course. A pedagogical formula would be disastrous. In teaching Literature perhaps more than anywhere else, the unfettered personality of the instructor must be cherished. Every day's lecture should be a challenge to his ingenuity. If his class feels convinced that his imaginative and emotional responses are rich and genuine, the subject-matter will come to life in their minds too.

Lionel Stevenson
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